



Fig 1.: Judaica Suite -  
UF Photography - 2016  
(photo credit: Hannah Pietrick).

# Where Kings & commoners meet



## The Global Cultural History Behind the Judaica Suite's Chess Sets

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Visitors to Smathers Library are often enthralled by the wide variety of chess pieces on display in the upper gallery of the Judaica Suite. The sets along the north end of the gallery were donated by Mr. Kenneth Treister, renowned Florida architect and artist, and his late wife, Helyne.

Each set represents a different societal, cultural, or political interpretation of the game. For example, a set from Bogota comprises sixteen peasant figurines ready to wage their struggle against sixteen aristocratic figurines; a set of cast lead chess pieces hand-painted in Dingle, Ireland, represents soldiers from different sides of the Napoleonic Wars; another set includes 32 pieces based on the Inca Civil War in 16th century Peru; and a set from China symbolizes battles of the mind and soul with various manifestations of the Buddha carved in jade.

The Judaica Suite has also received additional chess sets from other kind donors. These are displayed in the cabinets along the upper south wall. They include chess pieces gifted by Morris and Mikki Futernick from Greece, Holland, and Thailand, and pieces gifted by Wendy and Roy Evans depicting the Union and the Confederacy in the American Civil War and Charlemagne's army versus the Basque army in the eighth-century Battle of Roncevaux Pass.



"If you see a good move,  
look for an even better one."

- Pedro Damiano de Odemira



TREISTER, FUTERNICK, AND EVANS DONATED CHESS SETS FEATURED ON PAGES 17 THROUGH 19.

PHOTOS TRACY MACKAY-RATLIFF



The Judaica Suite's entire chess collection is fascinating both in terms of its individual pieces—each chess piece is a unique work of art—and in the way they collectively illustrate the long, multifaceted, and multicultural history of the game of chess. How then did chess pieces become so wide-ranging and the game of chess so widespread? And what connection, if any, does the game have to a Judaica library?

The earliest recognizable form of the game of chess was *Chaturanga*, a sixth-century Indian war game. In this game, different military pieces, such as infantry, chariots and elephants, held individual powers, and victory was achieved with just one key piece. By the Middle Ages, the game had spread to southeast Asia, and from there it was carried along the silk route into Persia and the Byzantine empire. With the subsequent expansion of the Arabian empire, Muslims brought a more evolved form of chess, known as *Shatranj*, into North Africa and Spain. The Islamic prohibition on idolatry meant that simple forms were favored over ornate figurative chess pieces. Unadorned pieces were easier to acquire, use, and transport thus encouraging the greater spread of the game. Multilingual Jews heavily involved in the flourishing Mediterranean trade in and out of the Middle East were often the facilitators of such cultural exchanges.

In the early medieval period, the counselor or minister chess piece became the queen. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, possibly inspired by Isabella I of Castille (1451-1504), the queen was accorded new powers. Her unmatched mobility across the board made her the most powerful piece which, together with new moves assigned to the bishop, greatly enhanced the strategic elements of the game. Chess masters from Spain, such as Luis Ramirez de Lucena (c. 1465-1530), began printing books on chess to solidify and codify its rules. In Portugal, Pedro Damiano de Odemira (1480-1544), a converted Jewish apothecary, published one of the earliest practical guides to the game. His work *Libro da imparare giocare à Scacchi* (a copy of which is displayed alongside the Judaica Suite chess sets on the south wall) helped popularize famous strategic openings like "Petrov's Defense" and the "Queen's Gambit Accepted." Damiano also coined the well-known chess mantra: "If you see a good move, look for an even better one."

As chess swept across Europe, it also gained social cachet, and its popularity among aristocrats and royalty led to the creation of elaborate, luxurious, and large-scale chess pieces. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, chess became predominant in the public sphere in the form of competitions. The first world championship was held in 1886 in the United States, and the first world champion was William Steinitz, an Austrian-born American Jew. Steinitz was unbeaten until 1894 when another Jewish player, German-born Edward Lasker, knocked him off his perch to become a long-standing grandmaster.

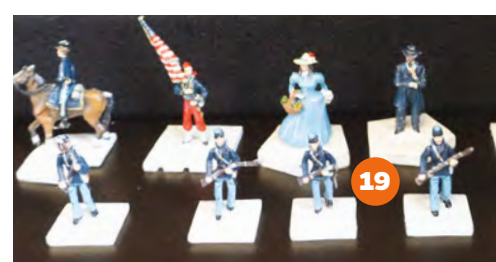




Fig 2.: *Libro da imparare giocare à Scacchi*, 1524, Pedro Damiano de Odemira (1480-1544), Portugal.

Fig 3.: Hand-painted pottery Queen, Spanish/Inca War 1532 - Cusco, Peru.



Fig 4.: Hand-painted, carved wood Queen from classic medieval chess set, France.

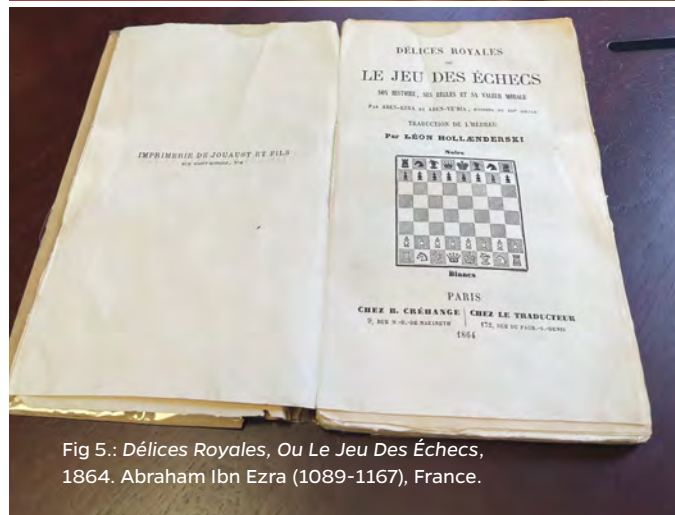


Fig 5.: *Délices Royales, Ou Le Jeu Des Échecs*, 1864. Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), France.

Steinitz and Lasker were the beneficiaries of over a thousand years of Jewish interest in the game of chess. A chess-like game was first mentioned in the Talmud (sixth century) and chess itself was written about in numerous medieval Jewish texts. In his famous philosophical work, the *Kuzari*, the Jewish scholar Judah Halevi (1075-1141) wrote about the importance of studying the game: “One cannot speak of luck or misfortune in a game like chess. For the rules of the game are quite open to study, and the expert will always be victorious” (*Kuzari* 5:20). His near-contemporary, the Jewish polymath Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), composed a Hebrew poem about chess, possibly one of the earliest written pieces to describe how each player moves. *Damiano*, the abovementioned apothecary, helped solidify the rules. By the early modern period, chess had become an increasingly popular Jewish pastime during the Sabbath, although some Jewish religious authorities expressly forbade it. By the mid-twentieth century, however, one of the most

influential Jewish leaders of the Chabad movement, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (1902-1994), proclaimed that chess carried a deeper spiritual meaning as a battle waged by good against evil to bring about a world of peace and harmony.

After the first world championship, many subsequent tournaments were played in Havana, Cuba, where chess became part and parcel of national identity and even now is taught in almost all schools. In 1911, Cuba’s most famous grandmaster, José Raúl Capablanca, challenged Edward Lasker to a world title match. However, due to their bitter disagreements over the rules of the contest, the game never took place. Capablanca later established match rules that all the leading players eventually accepted, even Lasker. Today, chess players and champions can be found in every country, and grandmasters come from all corners of the globe. As highlighted in the popular film *Queen of Katwe*, chess has even proved a means of social mobility.



In celebration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the Judaica Suite, a set of new chess pieces has been installed in the south end display cabinets. This magnificent set was gifted to the Libraries by the late Alfred C. Warrington IV and his wife, Judy A. Warrington. The Warringtons purchased it, together with a large inlaid wooden chessboard, from the estate auction of Mrs. Helen L. Kellogg, daughter of the breakfast cereal magnate. The chess set comprises sixteen German noblemen and women elaborately sculpted in fine silver and the opposing sixteen figures in vermeil; the humans have ivory faces, and each piece has a base surrounded by semi-precious stones. The pieces are stamped with the hallmark of a (maybe Jewish?) London silversmith: Israel Freeman & Son Ltd. Thus, through just one chess set, we can find echoes of German, American, British, and possibly Jewish cultural history. 🇺🇸



Fig 6.: Rebecca Jefferson, Curator of the Judaica Library, 2024.

**We hope that visitors will come and see this new chess set and continue to marvel at our entire collection. And perhaps, during our open reading day on Fridays, they may even stop to play a game of chess on the Judaica Suite’s own bespoke chess tables.**



Fig 7. and 8.: Chess set gifted to the Libraries by Alfred and Judy Warrington.